

## ***Gathering Nectar***

*We should imitate bees and we should keep in separate compartments whatever we have collected from our diverse reading, for things conserved separately keep better. Then, diligently applying all the resources of our native talent, we should mingle all the various nectars we have tasted, and turn them into a single sweet substance, in such a way that, even if it is apparent where it originated, it appears quite different from what it was in its original state.*

Seneca

*Make your own Bible. Select and Collect all those words and sentences that in all your reading have been to you like the blast of trumpet out of Shakespeare, Seneca, Moses, John and Paul.*

Emerson *Journals* July 1836

I speak of the collected volume of passages that I have transcribed from the books I've read as a commonplace book. So does Andre Bernard who edits a "Commonplace Section" for each issue of the *American Scholar*. Bernard collects extracts from various authors who have written about a particular topic and simply lists them on two pages of this publication without commentary or analysis. For example, recent topics have included Loafing, Change, Failure, and Marriage. A somewhat similar collection also appears in each monthly issue of *THE SUN*, <http://www.thesunmagazine.org>, where it is referred to as Sunbeams. For example, the January 2006 issue presented two columns of passages related to misfortune, despair, and dying from a wide range of authors including Socrates, Henry Miller, Mario Cuomo, and Ann Landers.

Yet a collection of this sort is quite different than the way “commonplace book” is formally defined. For example, the Oxford English Dictionary defines it as:

*A book in which ‘commonplaces’ or passages important for reference were collected, usually under general heads; hence, a book in which one records passages or matters to be especially remembered or referred to, with or without arrangement.*

My collection was never intended to be a reference book, nor have I organized the material under separate “heads” or topics. Yet that was the way commonplace books were originally conceived. The term “common place” can be traced to the Greeks who referred to the group of philosophical arguments and discussion topics used by statesman and orators as *koinoi topoi* (“general points). The Romans translated the phrase as *communes loci* (general areas of discussion) that scholars and orators also drew upon in composition or speaking. According to Gilbert Highet “some tasteless fellow Englished the term into “commonplaces.”<sup>1</sup> The sense in which the headings were “common” signifies their acceptance as the fundamental beliefs and moral principals of the times. It is ironic that in popular speech the term has come to mean something rather ordinary and unremarkable since there is clearly nothing the least bit ordinary or common in the commonplace books that stretch back to classical antiquity and the Renaissance.

According to Earle Havens Aristotle referred to the collected passages as: “the principal tools of any logical and systematic interrogation of the truth or falsity of an opinion.”<sup>2</sup> It is in this sense that commonplace books were originally

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<sup>1</sup> Gilbert Highet, Uncommon Thoughts in a Common Place, *Horizon Magazine*, Vol. IV, September 1961.

<sup>2</sup> Earle Havens. *Commonplace Books: A History of Manuscripts and Printed Books from Antiquity to the Twentieth Century*. University Press of New England. 2001.

considered to be organized sources of knowledge and practical wisdom. In Roman times Cicero carried on the tradition by drawing his commonplace material from the works of philosophers, orators, and poets and subsequently applied them in his public speaking and courtroom presentations.<sup>3</sup> In the Middle Ages Scholastic philosophers continued the practice but turned away from secular applications and substituted instead theological and religious words of wisdom as the materials for their commonplace books.

From all accounts the commonplace book tradition reached its peak of popularity during the Renaissance. This was associated with the revival of classical learning and the emergence of the humanistic critique of Scholasticism. Havens writes:

*Renaissance humanists, teachers, and students were among the first to deliberately invoke the term "commonplace book" to describe collections of quotations organized for the express purpose of demonstrating the best moral wisdom and rhetorical felicity of ancient Greek and Latin authors.*

Erasmus was perhaps the most influential advocate of drawing upon classical learning in this fashion and formulated several different methods for organizing the material. He was also instrumental in promoting commonplace books as an important educational tool, particularly in guiding students to a more disciplined method of reading.

In *A New Method of Making Commonplace Books*, John Locke presented one of the most systematic methods of organizing commonplace entries. At the outset Locke laid out an index keyed to each letter of the alphabet, each of which was divided into five separate

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<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*

boxes corresponding to one of the five vowels. Table 1 depicts one page of his grid.

**Table 1**

442 *A new Method of a Common-Place-Book.*

A	a	F	a
	e 4.		e
	i		i
	o		o
	u		u
B	a	G	a
	e		e
	i		i
	o		o
	u		u
C	a	H	a 12. 16.
	e		e
	i		i
	o 14.		o
	u		u
D	a	I	a
	e		e
	i		i
	o		o
	u		u
E	a	L	a
	e		e
	i 2. 10.		i
	o		o
	u		u

He explained his procedure this way:<sup>4</sup>

*When I meet with any thing that I think fit to put into my Common-Place-Book, I first find a proper head. Suppose for example, that the Head be EPISTOLA, I look into the Index for the first Letter and the following Vowel which in this instance are E.I. If in the space marked E. there is any number, That directs me to the Page designed for words that begin with an E and whose first Vowel, after the initial Letter, is I. I must then write under the word EPISTOLA in that Page what I have to remark.*

<sup>4</sup> John Locke, *A New Method of a Common-Place-Book*, 1706.

Locke did not begin with a pre-determined set of topics; instead he created them during the course of his readings. They included a broad array of themes, each in turn, followed by the passage he selected, and a comment of his own.

During the Renaissance commonplace books were developed for a wide range of disciplines including literature, law, philosophy, and science. But with the rise of science and the diminishing importance of proof by authority, the value of commonplace book collections declined fairly rapidly. This process was accelerated by the development of comprehensive encyclopedias as sources of reference during the Enlightenment. Havens summarizes evidence that fewer and fewer printed commonplace books appeared during the eighteenth century, “a period marked by greater public familiarity with other distinct forms of text compilation—verse anthologies, concordances, encyclopedias...”

Over the course of the next centuries, commonplace books continued to be published although their character changed significantly. Rather than sources of knowledge, they became more personal collections of literary extracts, occasionally followed by brief comments, but largely unorganized and highly idiosyncratic in subject matter. Insofar as the passages in these printed collections were gathered together under specific topics or themes, they still deviated significantly from the earlier forms of commonplace books that were structured and indexed in a rather systematic fashion. In a word, the nature of commonplace books evolved from a resource for argument and persuasion in antiquity, to a reference for knowledge and wisdom that flourished during the Renaissance, into its contemporary version of a personal collection of memorable literary quotations without any formal conceptual scheme.

### ***Representative Commonplace Books***

Several well-known writers, scholars, and statesmen have kept personal commonplace books; some have been published during their lifetime, while others

only after they had died. Two of the most notable of the later group were the commonplace books of John Milton and Thomas Jefferson. In a comprehensive examination of Milton's commonplace book, Ruth Mohl, notes that: "When it was discovered in 1874 it was stained with dampness and was bound in rough brown sheepskin..." and had no lettering to identify its author. Only after its contents were examined, including a letter written to Milton, was it identified as his.<sup>5</sup> Milton's commonplace book was organized by thematic indices or headings, such as Morality, Economy, and Literature. Mohl illustrates how Milton's collection provided a storehouse of facts for his political tracts and poetry.

The descendants of Thomas Jefferson withheld publication of his literary commonplace book until 1928.<sup>6</sup> It was one of the two notebooks he kept during the early part of his life; his second notebook dealt with governmental and political issues. His literary commonplace book was based on the work of philosophers and poets and is the earlier of the two. According to Douglas Wilson, who edited a 1988 edition of the work, Jefferson maintained it from the age of about fifteen to thirty and because it the most personal of the two, provides a rare glimpse of Jefferson's formative years and the considerable influence of literature on "the contours of his mind." Many of the entries, written by Jefferson in their original Latin, Greek, or French, seem to have been chosen because of their philosophical and moral content.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ruth Mohl. *John Milton and His Commonplace Book*, 1969. New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Company.

<sup>6</sup> Douglas L. Wilson (Ed.) *Jefferson's Literary Commonplace Book* 1989. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

<sup>7</sup> Wilson indicates that of the 407 entries, 339 are poetry, and 35 of the 45 authors quoted are poets. Homer, Horace, Pope, Milton, Shakespeare and Euripides are among the most frequently quoted

In noting some of the similarities between Jefferson's and Milton's commonplace books, Mohl suggests both men selected passages not only for their literary merit but also as "sources of inspiration and practical wisdom."<sup>8</sup> Later she concludes that like Milton's, Jefferson's literary commonplace book is alive with:

*Themes of courage, self-reliance, freedom, equality, the necessity of wisdom combined with strength, and faith in God...along with those on the brevity of life, death and the fatal beauty of women. In them the personality of Jefferson is strikingly revealed—as if in his own words he was recording his philosophy of life.*

As with the commonplace books of Milton and Jefferson, E. M. Forster's was not discovered until after his death in 1970.<sup>9</sup> He began it in 1925, when he was already 46 years old—about the same age I was when I started my own collection. His initial plan was to organize his selections by topics, but after his first three entries, *Commonplaces*, *Isolation* and *Resentment*, he abandoned this scheme because he "found it too preconceived and dictatorial." Forster's *Commonplace Book* combines literary passages with personal commentary--sometimes related to the passage, sometimes simply a reflection on another topic--so that in many respects it is both a commonplace book and personal journal. It unfolds cumulatively over time and is said by Gardner to provide a rare view of Forster's intellectual and emotional life. Gardner describes the growing sense of alienation that appears in the passages toward the end of his life and the increasing frequency of literary extracts and personal comments related to change, illness and death.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Mohl *ibid.* [Proper footnote format?]

<sup>9</sup> E. M. Forster *Commonplace Book*, Edited by Philip Gardner, 1985. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.

<sup>10</sup> One of the last entries Forster writes: "The belief that I may live after my breath ceases and my body begins to smell never occurs to me—either in the simple form cherished by my ancestors, or

In 1957 Charles P. Curtis, a professor of Government and Sociology at Harvard, published a delightful and somewhat distinctive commonplace book.<sup>11</sup> Each numbered entry begins with a quotation or aphorism drawn from his literary reading. It is then followed by Curtis' commentary in the manner that Erasmus had originally employed in the several editions of his *Adages*. Like Erasmus, some of Curtis' comments are relatively brief, while others are rather extensive. For example, the third entry poses an amusing question. "In a sense, one can never read the book that the author originally wrote, and one can never read the same book twice." It is followed by Curtis' comment:

*This is the last sentence of Edmund Wilson's preface to his The Triple Thinkers. 'Books are like rivers. "You cannot bathe in the same river twice, for the new waters are ever flowing in upon you," Heraclitus said.'*

*Or are we readers the rivers? And book the countryside through which we flow?*

In contrast, the twenty-second entry quotes a short passage from Marlow's *The Jew of Malta*: "But that was in another country; and besides the wench is dead." This extract gives rise to a three page commentary on the mystery of how "words move me without my knowing why or how." The appeal of Curtis' commonplace book is the wonderful interplay he creates between literary passages and his attempt to achieve some understanding of the reasons he was drawn to them. A good many people keep a record of their favorite quotes, proverbs, or literary passages, but far

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in the difficult modern ecclesiastical form...I think of death as a permanent anaesthetic—to be reached amidst pain or fear if my luck is bad, and under perfect hospital conditions if the luck's good. In either case it finishes me off as a memoirist or an observer."

<sup>11</sup> Charles P. Curtis. *A Commonplace Book*, 1957. New York: Simon and Schuster.

fewer annotate them by reflecting on their meaning and personal relevance as Curtis did.

David Cecil is quite forthright in admitting this is the case for his commonplace book. In 1975 Cecil published *Library Looking Glass*<sup>12</sup>, an anthology of literary passages with extensive annotations that is in many respects a commonplace book at its very best. The passages are drawn from well known literary works, they are provocative, and most are followed with critical comments that are both autobiographical and a pleasure to read. Cecil's volume is also distinctive in that the passages are arranged alphabetically beginning with Art and ending with Wordsworth, leaving blank X, Y, and Z.

Some of the letters have more than one topic, as in "C" with entries on Change of Key, Child in the House, Colour Sense, Comedy, Class System, Classics, Commitment, Complaints, Comparative, Conservation, Content, Contrasts, and Criticism. In addition, more often than not, several passages have been listed for each topic. For example, Cecil has listed nine separate poetry passages for Autumn, while English Landscape has eleven

Cecil was an English aristocrat, literary scholar, and biographer who taught at Oxford for many years. In an amusing introduction to the volume Cecil takes issue with those who recoil from the practice of writing in printing books. He says it is really a compliment to its author saying "It treats him as a living man, with whom one wants, as it were, to converse." In an echo of my own practice, as well as those of most contemporary readers who keep a commonplace book, Cecil writes:

*...when anything in the text has especially struck me, I have noted on the end-paper the number of the page where this has occurred.*

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<sup>12</sup> David Cecil. *Library Looking-Glass: A Personal Anthology*, 1975. Constable and Company: London

*Sometimes my note simply indicated admiration...The passage referred to was beautiful or comical or well-written in ways that had a peculiar appeal to my own taste, or it stated a view which I found especially illuminating; or it stimulated in me a fruitful train of thought.*

In a *Library Looking Glass*, Cecil has assembled a selection of these passages and has usually added a comment suggesting why they have evoked his interest. Cecil admits that his reasons were largely personal and for this reason his anthology can be thought of as a “sort of self-portrait; myself, as mirrored in the looking-glass of my reading.” While his volume may be autobiographical, because there is no temporal order to the alphabetical ordering of the topics, it is difficult to read through from beginning to end, as one would read a personal history. Instead, I prefer to dip into it from time to time and skip around from topic to topic in no particular order. Whenever I do this, I find the passages Cecil has selected and his thoughtful commentaries a continuing source of pleasure.

W. H. Auden also organized his commonplace book, *A Certain World*,<sup>13</sup> under thematic headings arranged in alphabetical order. So, for example, the first two are Accidie and Acronyms, while the last two are Word and Writing—apparently he could not come up with anything worthy of citation for X, Y, and Z. Auden does not comment on every entry, preferring instead to keep his own reflections, particularly those that might be viewed as autobiographical, “to a minimum and let others more learned, intelligent, imaginative and witty than I, speak for me.”

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<sup>13</sup> W. H. Auden. *A Certain World: A Commonplace Book*, 1970. The Viking Press: New York.

Nevertheless, his intermittent annotations are far from impersonal. For example, before listing passages from Proust, Ruskin, Goethe and others in the section on Ageing, Auden writes:

*I was both the youngest child and the youngest grandchild in my family. Being a fairly bright boy, I was generally the youngest in my school class. The result of this was that, until quite recently, I have always assumed that, in any gathering, I was the youngest person present....It is only in the last two or three years that I have begun to notice, to my surprise, that most of the people I see on the streets are younger than I. For the first time, too, though still in good health, I am almost able to believe that I shall die.*

What could be more autobiographical than that? And a few pages later, before quoting a poem, *Park Concert*, under the heading Bands, he recalls:

*When I was young, brass-band concerts were a regular attraction in the public parks of cities. Am I mistaken in thinking that they have become rarities? All I know is that this poem fills me with nostalgia.*

And under his last heading, Writing, after citing several passages concerning this topic, he comments: "Most of what I know about the writing of poetry, or, at least, the kind I am interested in writing, I discovered long before I took an interest in poetry itself." He continues with a two-page recollection of various experiences that influenced his work as a poet.

In a review of *A Certain World*, Benjamin DeMott considers one of the questions that led me to look closely at my own commonplace book, namely what it might

reveal about the underlying patterns of a person's life.<sup>14</sup> DeMott suggests one can learn a great deal about the kind of person Auden is from the entries in his commonplace book. He writes that aside from what we already know about him,

*You make out too that he's not young, that he's often melancholy and self accusatory, that he finds life short. And you can assume only a little speculatively, that he lends excitement to the lives of his friends not alone through his writing.....[and is] a rueful, deep, humorous, loving man.*

It would not be a stretch to conclude that Auden's comments in his commonplace book are a good deal more personal than he is willing to admit. So too, I imagine are the entries of the authors of most commonplace books.

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<sup>14</sup> Benjamin DeMott. Speaking of Books: Auden's Commonplace Book. *New York Times*, September 13, 1970.

